

## Thomas Henry Sault OAM

26 July 1922 - 10 September 2008

Tom Sault was born in Eildon to Gladys and Harry Sault. A year later his sister Clara was born. He had only a few years of schooling at the local primary school, where the boys generally went barefoot, before the impact of the Depression resulted in the family moving. Tom's father took on work with a construction crew, building roads and bridges in the Heytesbury Forest near Timboon. There the family lived in a tent, with saplings and wheat or potato bags for beds. Tom's mother cooked for the men on a large wood stove under a tarpaulin. Tom's job was to collect the wood and kindling, as well as the water in four-gallon tins. Once this was done, he often set off barefoot into the bush to explore.

Whilst in the area, Tom and Clara apparently attended the nearby Paaratte School. Occasionally they had an outing to the beach near Peterborough and Port Campbell. Without a doubt, this freedom helped further develop Tom's love of nature, which was to continue throughout his life.

On their return to Eildon about two years later, Tom returned briefly to school. A second house, which had belonged to the neighbours, was moved next to theirs and his father added several rooms onto it. Tom's mother then began a guest house for visitors, particularly fishermen. She provided lodgings with home-cooked meals for 35 shillings a week. Candles, lamps and a fireplace provided light, and water was later pumped up to the house from the river. Harry and his friend took up gold prospecting in the Jerusalem Creek area.

Tom learnt to fish and became a keen fisherman over the years. He also caught rabbits and sold the skins, played the mouth organ, learnt to play the piano, milked the cows and cared for the pigs. On Wednesdays he rode his bike out along rough tracks to see his father, taking him more food. On one occasion, he and his father explored Enoch's Point together, hoping to find another place to search for gold. They pushed everything they needed in a wooden barrow and lived on rabbit stew. However, their trip proved fruitless.



Tom enjoyed having his casement window open, especially at night. He would listen to the river, watch the stars, observe bats coming into his room to catch insects, and enjoy the birds in the early morning.

At age 14, Tom was working on a pine plantation on the Delatite Arm of Eildon Weir, keeping up the supply of seedlings to the men as they planted them on the steep slopes. He was paid two pounds six shillings a week, half the basic wage. Tom trapped rabbits after work and lived mainly on rabbit stew. Later, he stoked the boilers at a timber mill near Snob's Creek. It was pleasant in winter, but terribly hot in summer. Tom worked five and a half days a week and then walked home for the remainder of the weekend, through the bush and along animal tracks. He would return on Sunday night, having enjoyed his mother's cooking and carrying his food for the week ahead.

He worked for the Forest Commission at about age 17, helping to build a fire lookout of

Mountain Ash and Alpine Ash on Lake Mountain. He said 'It was the coldest job I ever had. I suffered from chilblains and could hear the dingoes howling at night.'

During World War II, Tom enlisted at age 18 and served in New Guinea, the Solomon Islands and Rabaul. Even there, he had his eyes open for anything related to natural history, which helped ease his wartime experiences.

On his return, Tom knew he did not want to go prospecting. He completed a cabinet-making course in Melbourne through the Post War Scheme for ex-servicemen. He then went on to build many staircases and cupboards for shops and homes in Melbourne.

Later, Tom's outdoor interests resulted in him completing a geology course and this in turn led him to the Field Naturalists' Club of Victoria (FNCV), in 1962. He immediately became actively involved in the Geology Group, followed by the Botany Group and the Mammal Survey Group (now the Fauna Survey Group).

He was a member of Council from 1964 to 1966 and again from 1974 to 1979. Tom was elected Vice President from 1966 to 1969 and in 1970 became President for three years. During the 1960s and 1970s he was heavily involved with the annual Nature Show held at the Melbourne Town Hall, which promoted the FNCV.

Tom participated in Fauna Survey Group activities for many years, organising camps, collating records, transporting equipment, and attending most survey camps and meetings. At the surveys in the Big River valley near Eildon area, where Tom had lived as a boy, his local knowledge was valued, and he was able to take members on an excursion to his father's gold mine to search for bats. Around the campfire he could relate the local history as he knew it to a younger generation. The Fauna Survey group conducted many surveys in coastal woodland and heathland such as on Mornington Peninsula, Western Port, Wilson's Promontory and Nooramunga, in search of rarities such as the New Holland Mouse. It was in these surveys in particular that Tom's knowledge of coastal heathlands came to the fore.

In 1989, the Fauna Survey Group presented Tom with a plaque on a blue gum burl for his dedication to the group over many years. He became an Honorary Life Member of FNCV in 1991.

Tom had retired in 1982, and moved to the Mornington Peninsula. He quickly joined the Friends of Arthur's Seat State Park and went on to be a founding member of several other groups including the Friends of the Hooded Plover, the Friends of the Tootgarook Wetlands and the Seawinds Nursery Volunteers. He was a life member of the Southern Peninsula Tree Preservation Society and the Southern Peninsula Indigenous Flora and Fauna Association.

During the late 1990s, Tom and Clara were taken back to Eildon. The original property had been flooded when Lake Eildon was enlarged, much to their mother's sorrow. She had resided there for fifty years. It gave Tom much pleasure to rekindle old memories and to encounter several people he had known. Their land and the remains of buildings were clearly visible later, as a result of the drought.

*The Mornington Peninsula Through the Eye of a Naturalist* was published in 2003, recounting Tom's personal observations and knowledge of the plants, fauna and geology of the region over many years.

In 2005 Tom was awarded a Medal of the Order of Australia (OAM) 'for service to the community of the Mornington Peninsula, particularly through the promotion and protection of the natural environment'.

Tom was an avid reader and kept up-to-date with many issues. He was largely self-taught, had a remarkable memory and was extremely interested in how the geology of an area influenced the flora and fauna. Despite ongoing health issues he loved life, had a sparkle in his eye and remained involved, positive and interested in everything the FNCV and the groups on the Peninsula were doing, until he passed away. He was always well-respected, sharing his knowledge of fauna, flora and his own personal experiences generously, patiently and enthusiastically with both young and old. Tom showed great integrity throughout his life and was a wonderful mentor and friend to all who knew him. He will be greatly missed by many people.

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